

Presocratic philosophy: a very short introduction

Catherine Osborne

*Now Thales was a wise man, as wise as wise can be.
He thought the earth was floating like a raft upon the sea,
and everything is water (though not that you can see).
So Thales was a wise man, as wise as wise can be.*

*The next, Anaximander, was so very nearly right!
He poised the world in something that was vague and
infinite.
A column drum of earth was ringed with tubes that give
out light,
and the whole lot comes from stuff that is both vague
and infinite.*

*The third of the Milesian men was Anaximenes.
He said the earth was resting on an upward blowing
breeze;
and everything is made of air: the clouds, the rocks, the
trees,
and stars and moon, which scud across the windswept
sky with ease.*

*Pythagoras the sage, who disapproved of eating beans,
had a theory of the numbers which could say what each
one means.
And after death our souls migrate to turkeys and
sardines,
so to be Pythagorean you must stick to eating greens.*

*Xenophanes thought quite a lot about our mortal lot.
He wondered if the things men think are truly clear or not.
And if they do not know they know, well, do they know,
or what?
They're not like god – who needs no eyes – let that not
be forgot!*

*They told me, Heraclitus, they told me that you said
that opposites are never two but really one instead –
the good, the bad, the ups and downs, the living and the
dead –
and all is flux: we cannot twice step in one stream, you
said.*

*Parmenides, O Noble Youth, your goddess said to you
that nothing ever changes and nothing's ever new –
though 'nothing' really can't exist, and everything's
illu-
sory, the coming and the going, and the red, the green,
the blue.*

*'You might have thought,' old Zeno said, 'that moving
bodies move,
but that's all wrong: they never budge, as I'll go on to
prove.
To catch the plodding tortoise, though he starts at one
remove,
Achilles never could succeed, however long he strove.'*

*Things seem to change, to shrink and grow, said
Anaxagoras,
but that's not real – not how things are – just how it
seems for us.
For every bit contains a bit of all the rest; and thus
our hair can grow, when we eat chips, and milk, when
cows eat grass.*

*Leucippus and Democritus for atoms were most famed:
The world is formed from tiny bits, they famously
proclaimed.
Yet it isn't atoms only that can sensibly be named,
for void exists – that's 'nothing', but we needn't be
ashamed.*

*Sicilian bard, Empedocles, so cool and debonair,
in exile from Love's paradise, what alien flesh you
wear!
In Strife, you say, the roots divide – earth, water, fire
and air –
but when Strife's gone, and Love returns, shall I (still
me) be there?*

*And so the Presocratics, all the histories avow,
are called the first philosophers. For they discovered how
to ask and answer questions common sense would not
allow.
They then passed it on to Socrates, who passed it on to
now.*

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